

Elizabeth Duvall

Professor Andréa Banke

Contemporary Issues in American Arts

28 August, 2021

Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges Within the Arts

Behind the inspiring success stories we admire, there trailed behind a series of problems that needed to be acknowledged and overcome. The Arts have had their fair share of successes, but they have also seen extreme hardship, especially in the last few decades. In order to get to the root of these problems, we need to differentiate between technical and adaptive issues to determine how best to fix them. Technical problems can generally be solved through the current system in place. Issues with money, management, and marketing don't require a new set of skills, but rather a different approach using current knowledge and skills. Adaptive challenges can be more complex because they involve a shift in vision. Incredible advancements in technology and a shift away from arts education have had a significant impact on the Arts. Outdated traditions and values need to be uprooted to incite change in a stagnant environment (Parks 10).

What do ABBA, the Barenaked Ladies, and Tevye the Dairyman have in common with the Arts? They all believe the root of their problems is money! At times, well intentioned board members choose to sacrifice quality, individuality, and originality to save a few bucks (Kaiser 22). Unlike in Europe, where much of the Arts are funded by the government, the United States relies mainly on the generosity of its patrons (Kaiser 9). It's

not that audiences are no longer interested in the arts, but the increase in ticket prices has risen so dramatically and the Income Gap has forced a generation of arts enthusiasts to make income driven decisions (Kaiser 6-7). Still, it is “wrong to blame...all problems on the economy” (Kaiser 36). Rather, Arts organizations need to address the problems that have been swept under the rug, such as the unbalanced growth between earned income and cost of living, a lack of government support and funding, an over-reliance on wealthy patrons and donors, and a lack of sufficient leadership and management.

In the first chapter of *Leadership for a Changing World: A Call to Adaptive Work*, Sharon Daloz Parks compares the concepts of power and progress in regards to positions of formal authority. I’ve seen firsthand how a self-serving individual can allow the appeal of power to cloud their judgement. Power hungry individuals will take advantage of an organization in order to make a name for themselves and fail to lead an organization to progress successfully. Oftentimes, formal authority and leadership are viewed as synonymous, when the reality is that leadership should be considered an activity or action, not a position of power. Even well intentioned figures of formal authority, such as board members or managers, can inadvertently compromise the success of their organizations by not fully understanding how the Arts function in a healthy manner. Michael Kaiser touches on the importance of properly trained management and appropriate board representation in his lecture, “The Future of the Arts in America”. Arts managers need to know how to build up their levels of support, plan ahead, focus on institutional marketing and building relationships, support essential arts education programs, and ensure that the board is both fulfilling their obligations and accurately reflecting their targeted audiences. If that isn’t happening, it’s time to make some changes.

Surprisingly, technical issues may very well be the “easy” problems to consider. In an ever changing world, adaptive challenges “call for changes of heart and mind - the transformation of long-standing habits and deeply held assumptions and values” (Parks 10). While the skills of arts management may lie within the technical realm, the concept of leadership has transformed in recent years. We should no longer be waiting for the “born leaders” to save the day. I am reminded of the quote that is often incorrectly attributed to Gandhi; “be the change you wish to see in the world”. Leading is about being present in decision making, understanding the concept of the common good, and remaining grounded despite the uncertainty (Parks 3-4, 11).

We have seen prodigious changes in recent history, but in many ways we still cling to the past. Technology is seen as both a blessing and a burden, as it has drastically changed the way we consume content (Kaiser 10, 25, 29). The Arts need to embrace and utilize technology, especially considering it is an excellent, FREE marketing tool that can easily reach far more potential patrons than older forms of media ever could. The Income Gap has left us with a generation that was unable to instill an appreciation for the arts in their children, and we are now seeing that reflected in the lack of arts education opportunities, especially within schools. Reaching younger audiences and convincing them to become subscribers, donors, and patrons becomes exceedingly more difficult when “we are not truly educating our children to think of the arts as a vital, consistent part of their lives” (Kaiser 51).

The show must go on. If we can first acknowledge the issues plaguing the Arts, and then understand what tools are needed to restore equilibrium, we can begin rebuilding our infrastructure and inspire new generations to see the value and joy the Arts holds.

Works Cited Page

Curtains?: The Future of the Arts in America, by Michael M. Kaiser, Brandeis Univ. Press, 2015, pp. 1–56.

ArtsFund, Seattle, director. *The Future of the Arts in America: A Conversation with Michael Kaiser*. YouTube, YouTube, 27 Mar. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSyW9thN2jY.

Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World, by Sharon Daloz Parks, Harvard Business School Press, 2005, pp. 1–17.